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SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: AUSTRIAN HEALTH MINISTRY VIEWS

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¶1. (U) Summary: DCM discussed avian flu in a February 16 meeting with Dr. Clemens Auer, Chief of Staff of the Minister of Health and Women (MoH). The two also exchanged views on biotechnology and tradition-based violence against women. On avian flu, Auer said that the GOA welcomes improving international coordination, as well as increased USG participation. While the problem is serious, the GOA strives to avoid panic and hysteria by being fully open and transparent. Auer noted that Health Minister Rauch-Kallat has called a meeting of Health Ministers to discuss avian flu in Brussels on March 10. He also reaffirmed the GOA's readiness to host the next International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza (IPAPI) conference in Vienna on June 5-6, and said he understood preparatory work to be moving forward. END Summary.

Coordination: National, EU, and International

¶2. (SBU) Auer said that the EU has a well-established coordination system that is excellent on the avian flu side and satisfactory on the pandemic side. Auer said that the acquisition of vaccines is an area where the EU and other bodies could benefit from improved coordination. Until now, there has been too much a mentality of "every man for himself," which means that some countries will end up with large amounts of stockpiled medicine (i.e. Tamiflu), while others will have nothing. Auer said that by mid-2007, the GOA will have stockpiled 4.5 million antiviral treatments. It will be the highest per capita coverage in Europe and will cost between Euros 50-60 million: "a little bit ridiculous," Auer noted.

¶3. (U) Auer was also pleased at the improving international level of coordination, evidenced particularly in Beijing. The GOA was initially skeptical about IPAPI. However, the Austrians welcome the fact that the USG has increased its focus on cooperation and Austria looks forward to hosting the next IPAPI meeting on June 5-6, 2006 in Vienna. Auer lauded the tenor of the January International Donor Pledging Conference on Avian and Human Influenza in Beijing, describing it as an "impressive conference" where donors succeeded in working together to achieve consensus.

Further Restrictive Measures in Austria?

¶4. (U) At the moment, H5N1 incidence has only occurred in wild birds in Austria. The big fear is that it will spread to poultry. Although the idea of caging chickens is

difficult for a country that boasts a proud free-range industry, the GOA will not hesitate to do so if the problem spreads. Auer said that the minute an infected bird is found outside a designated high-risk area (near lakes and rivers where migratory birds congregate), a nationwide obligation to keep birds in closed areas would go into effect.

15. (U) The MoH's chief medical officer was due to meet poultry producers in southern Austria on February 15. Auer said that the producers might ask the GOA to impose indoor confinement of poultry. They are nervous for the health of the industry, especially after witnessing the recent collapse of the poultry market in Italy.

Battling Public Panic

16. (U) Auer said that a lesson learned from the avian flu crisis in Autumn 2005 was the importance of the media in the public information effort. Dissemination of accurate information is key to this strategy. The GOA held seminars for journalists so that the press could learn the true story from scientific experts and government officials directly. Since building relationships of trust with the press was key, the GOA has adhered to a "fully open and transparent media policy."

17. (U) Auer also noted that in response to the identification of multiple H5N1 cases in the EU, Minister of Health Rauch-Kallat decided, in coordination with EU Health Commissioner Markos Kypriano, to organize a meeting of all EU Ministers of Health on March 10, 2006 in Brussels.

Update on Vaccines

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18. (SBU) The GOA is currently negotiating an agreement with the Austrian subsidiary of Baxter for the proposed purchase of 16 million doses of a prophylactic human influenza vaccine (two doses needed for each of Austria's 8 million inhabitants). The GOA believes that Baxter's advantage is its viral cell technology, which is significantly faster than the egg-based technology traditionally used. Once it isolates a virus, Baxter would be able to produce a vaccine in 10-12 weeks. Egg-based technology would take two to three times as long.

19. (SBU) Auer said that initially the GOA was skeptical of Baxter's claims. However, after further discussions with the company, as well as consultations with virologists, the GOA is increasingly confident that Baxter can fulfill its promises. When the GOA first began negotiations with Baxter, the company indicated its production capacity was one million doses per week. However, Baxter officials recently have amended that estimate to two million doses per week that would be produced in two factories: one in Orth, Austria and the other in the Czech Republic. It is also possible that Baxter would expand its plant in Krems, Austria to accommodate vaccine production.

Austrian Opposition to GMOs

110. (SBU) In a brief exchange on Austrian opposition to agricultural biotechnology, Auer said that Austrian public opinion largely drives GOA policy. Auer acknowledged that one could describe Austrian views as "extreme." In explaining the psychology behind this, he said that Austrian agriculture is very proud of its organic sector, and will do everything within its power "to keep it clean." WTO rulings notwithstanding, the agricultural sector, supported by the Austrian public, will fight for what it deems a vital economic sustainability issue.

Combating Tradition-Based Violence Against Women

¶11. (SBU) In her ministry's EU Presidency program, Minister Rauch-Kallat has focused on the issue of tradition-based violence against women. While she has succeeded in raising awareness on the EU level, Auer said that the Minister has encountered resistance on the international level. She has failed in her attempts to make it part of the UN agenda, mainly because of resistance from African and Muslim countries which view this as a cultural issue.

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Auer is a committed and reasoned interlocutor. He strongly agreed that the Austrian-U.S. relationship should focus on the great number of points in common between the two countries, rather than the differences. The GOA's rapid response to the first avian flu cases here shows that both as a country and EU President, Austria is preparing well for the further challenges that avian flu will present in the coming months. As Auer made clear, the U.S. will find Austria a strong international partner in this area.

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